

House Bill 228
January 20, 2011
Presented by Dave Risley
House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Dave Risley, Fish & Wildlife Administrator of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am here today as an informational witness and to answer any questions you may have on House Bill 228.

Hunting is a way of life for many Montanans. Hunters play an important role in the fabric of our state. But at what age and who should make that decision is the heart of this legislation. We lead the nation in per capita participation in the sport. Montana is one of the few states that have not seen a decline in hunting participation. License sales in Montana have been stable for the last several years.

Currently, Montanans must be 12 by January 15, of the year following the general hunting season in order to hunt. To carry or use a firearm in public, a youth under 14 years of age must be accompanied by a person 18 years of age or older. Approximately 6,500 individuals take hunter education in Montana each year. Those individuals are instructed by approximately 1,500 volunteer hunter and bowhunter education instructors. That number has remained relatively stable for the last several years.

HB228 gets to the heart of what Montanan's last two legislative sessions and most state wildlife agencies have tried to address--an aging hunting population and how to encourage young hunters to participate. While Montana has not experienced the decline in hunting participation that other states have, the average age of our hunting population has risen.

Many different approaches are being taken across the country to encourage participation and recruitment with little statistically valid evaluations. Those include lowering or eliminating the minimum hunting age, special youth seasons, making it easier and more convenient to meet hunter education requirements through shortened classes and online programming, and addressing the issue of accompaniment of youth in the field (mentoring).

In Montana the minimum age to hunt has been 12 since the time there was a minimum age. We have, in recent history done a number of things to encourage youth participation similar to what other states have done. Those have included reduced and in some cases free licenses, making it more convenient to meet our state's hunter education requirements and offering special hunting opportunities deer, waterfowl and deer.

Research has shown that having multiple opportunities in the field is critical for laying the foundation for a lifetime of hunting. The research is less clear on the best age to introduce youth to hunting, given differences in physical, mental and emotional maturity development. Information we've gleaned from other states indicate there have been few additional hunting accidents the result of lowering the hunting age.

~~Two~~ ^{One} points of clarification should be considered by the committee. Section 4 states that youth would be eligible for licenses at half the regular price, the state currently offers youth licenses that are less expensive than half the regular price. ~~Second, it's unclear to us in Section 5 whether the individuals listed would be exempt from the hunter education requirement.~~